

THE WITCH BOY



MOLLY KNOX ØSTERTAG


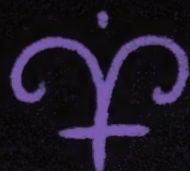
 SCHOLASTIC

Illustration by Molly Knox

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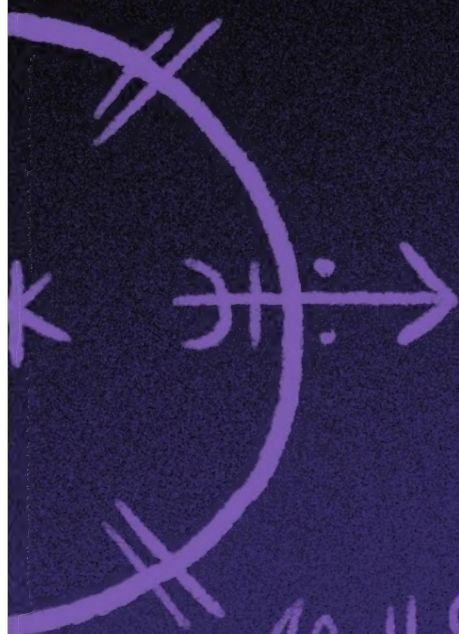
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MOLLY KNOX



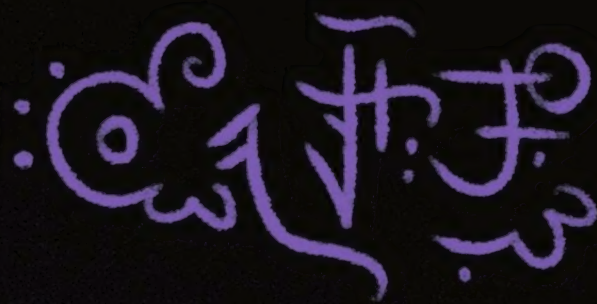
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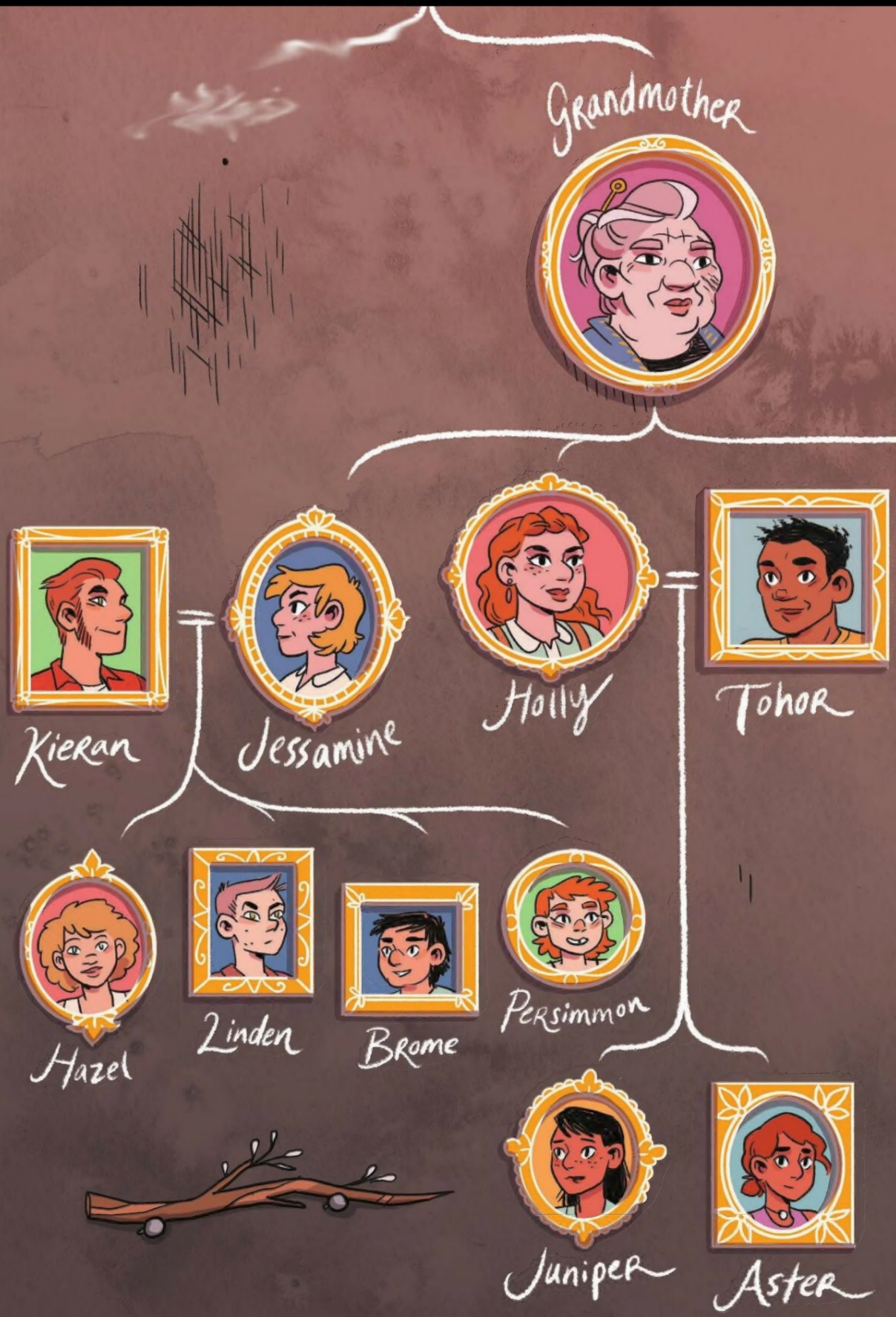
THE ITCH BOY

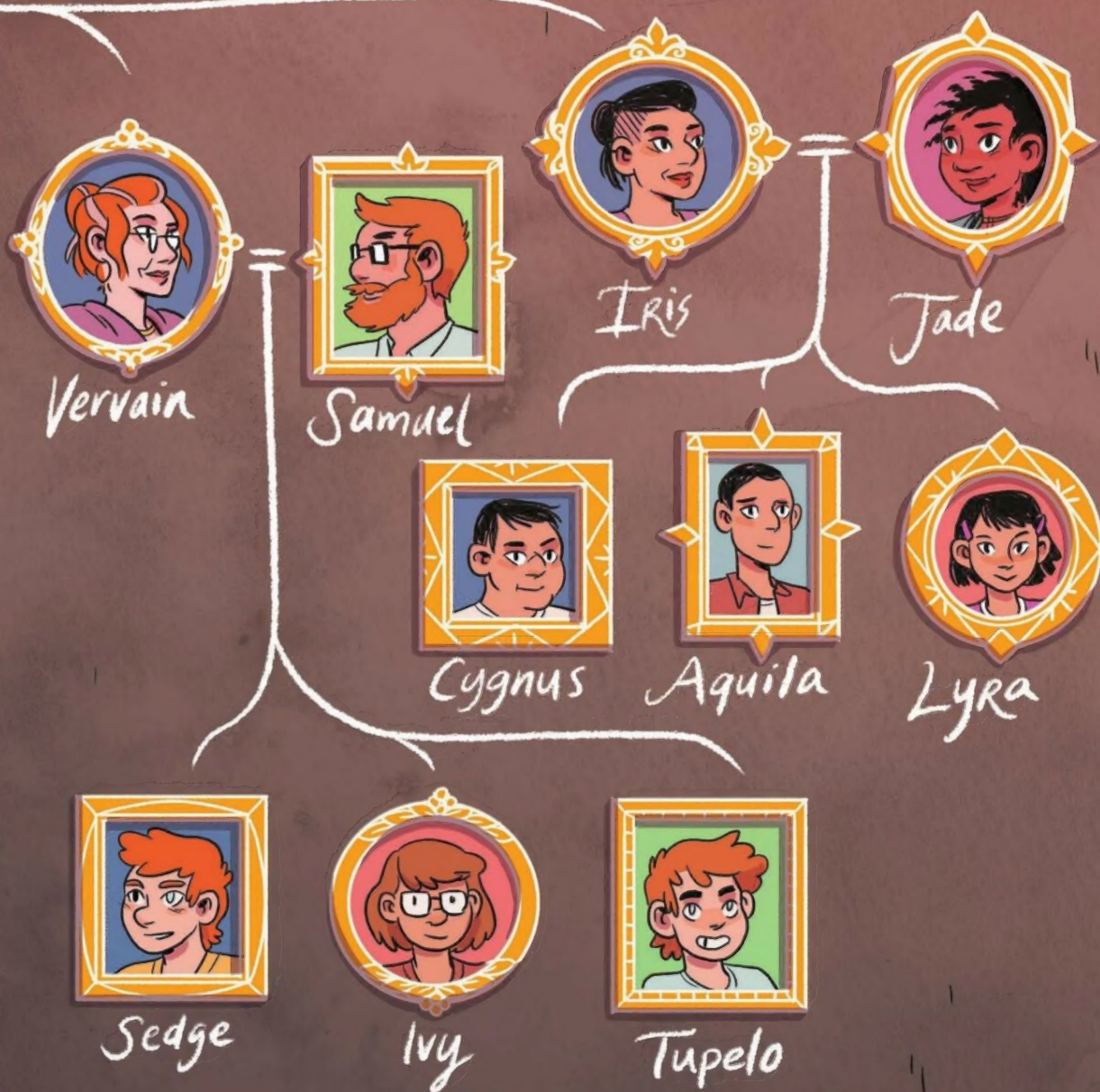


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 SCHOLASTIC





This book is dedicated to Wayfinder, the summer camp
in upstate New York where I first learned about magic.

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Library of Congress Control Number Available

e-ISBN 978-1-338-08953-0

First edition, November 2017

Edited by Amanda Maciel

Lettering and color by Molly Knox Ostertag

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Time for the
first lesson of the day,
my daughters.

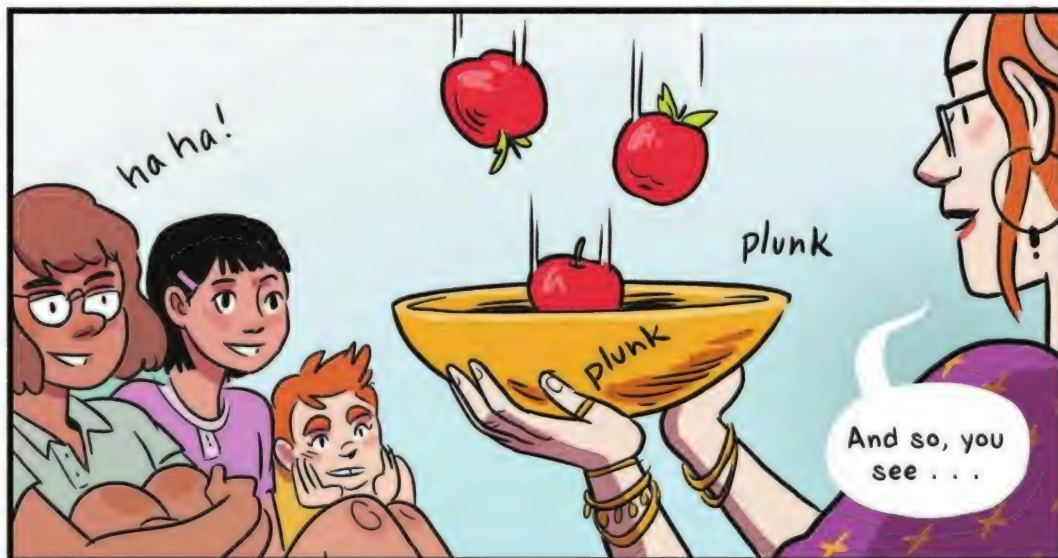


Now, if you are hungry in the forest, you need not despair.

You can convince most trees to blossom and grow fruit, as long as you ask politely and address them using the proper terms.













Aunt
Vervain
caught me
again.



I don't understand why
Juniper and Hazel and them
can all learn how to talk to
trees and make potions and
do spells and I can't.

It's
not fair.























... asked me
to make a flower grow in
class yesterday, but instead I
made the desk start sprouting
leaves, so embarrassing ...



I think my dad had to
chop that up for firewood!
He didn't look happy.



Aster . . .

Don't you want to go eat dinner with the other boys?





Aster . . .

Don't you want
to go eat dinner with
the other boys?













Animal dreams,
Aster.

Animal
spirits will come
to you in dreams
to see if you're
fit to receive
their gifts.



I had a
dream about
some bees a
few weeks
ago.

But I'd just
been working in
the beehives,
so . . .



You came back
to help Aster
prepare for the
Finding?

That's
right.



This time you'll
Find your first
form -- I can
smell it!

You Found
your form the
first time you
tried.

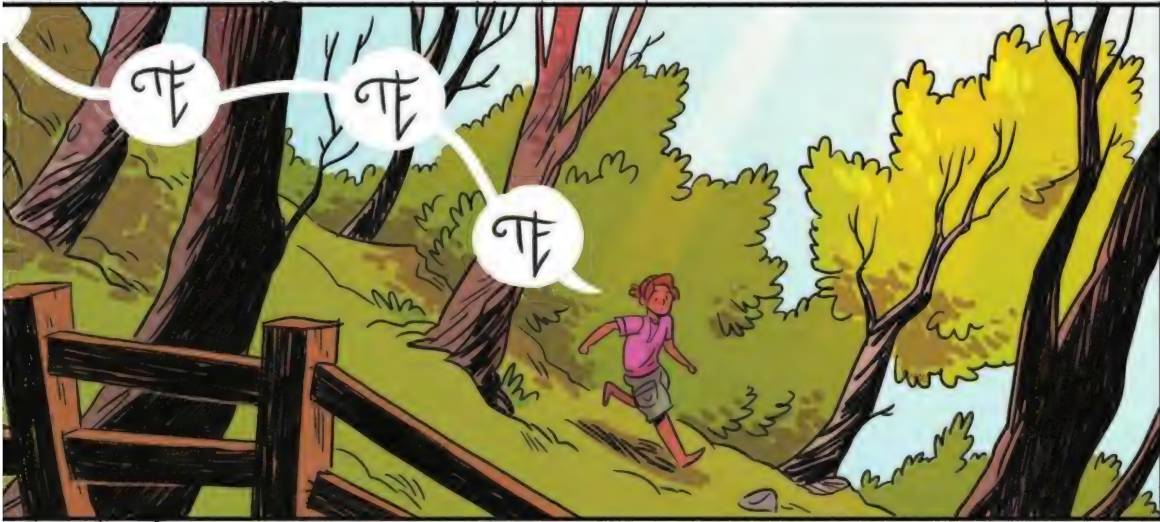


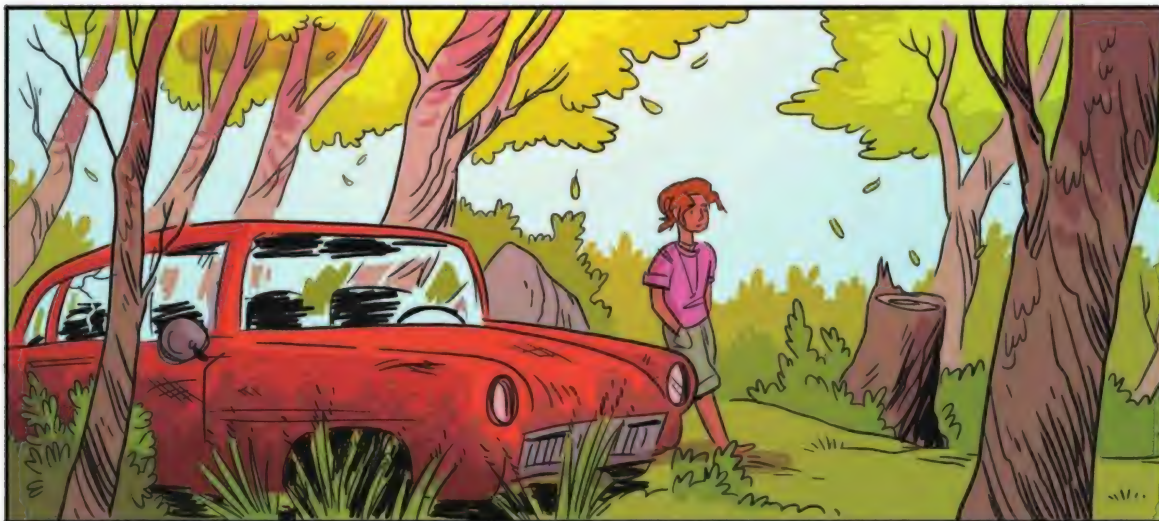
Well . . . yes,
but plenty of shifters
I know tried three,
even four years, before
a spirit approached
them.
































A night scene with a crescent moon and stars over a village. In the foreground, a group of people stands around a bonfire. The village features several buildings, including a large house with a red roof and a smaller structure with a yellow roof. The background is filled with dark, silhouetted trees.

For as long as anyone can remember, and longer still, the animal spirits that we share our world with have offered the men of our family a great gift.

We may speak
with them, enlist their
help, and, most powerful of
all, take their gifts and
assume their forms.



You will have had dreams
where you met with animals
and spoke with them.



These were spirits seeking
you out, deciding if you were
worthy of their favor.





Tonight, on the equinox, you will go out into the forest and seek a spirit of your own.

It may test you; pose you riddles or wrestle for dominance.

If you impress it, it will give you its form to wear.

Stay alert, be clever, and take what is offered.

I know this is your night, my son.



Only beneficial spirits
may cross the boundaries
of our property.



Tonight, especially,
there are demons waiting
outside the borders.



Be safe,
sons.







Please come.

This time, this year, finally,
please let me see you.



"crunch"
"crunch"







Easy, there,
easy.

My name
is --

Sedge!



Ssh! I'm
talking to an
animal spirit.



But the
boundaries --













There's neither sign nor scent of him. He must have been taken.



This is a bad night for demons.

I always think it's foolish, having the Finding on this night.









Three years
and two months.

pat
pat



Are you
helping Mom?

We're trying to scry
for Sedge, me and some
of the younger girls.



Scry?

Use magic to
look for him.

But none of the
normal bowls we use
are working, so I'm
looking for something
else . . .



You look in
a bowl?

In water.
In a silver bowl,
usually. Silver
for the moon.

And you reflect
the moon in it, and
you stir it counter-
clockwise, and --



And?

Aha!



And say
the person's
name.



But you're not
supposed to know
about that.



You should go
to bed, Aster.







This is private.
We're here so witches
can't spy on us.























I'm good at ...
this one thing, but it's a
thing that only girls do.

But I'm not
good at boy stuff,
and I just ...

want to
help.



























































Really, really stupid.



I think I came . . . this way.

Don't want to worry Mom . . .



SNAP!



Stupid, stupid . . .



SNAP
CRK
SNAP



Okay, who's there?
Linden, you'd better not be sneaking up on me --





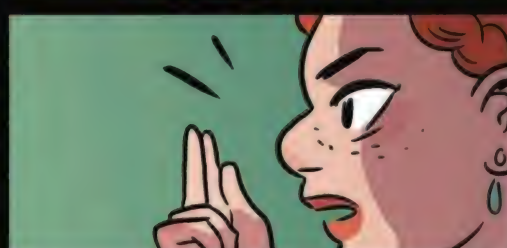














Still,
Aster?



This magic
isn't for you.

I wouldn't
even be drawing it with
you here if everyone else
wasn't in such a tizzy.
All these terrible things
happening.



Now
get --

go back to
the house and ask
Uncle Kieran if you
can help him.





... All we know is that something corrupted Sedge.



He's still him, as far as I can see. The use of his name was efficacious, and ...



I'll have to look at him with my eyestone in the morning --

But he's been twisted into the worst, most vicious shape he could become.







Wanted to go back to the witches,
wanted them to take care of you?



Wish I could free you,
but they've got your name.

Don't hold it
against me.













I can't tell my mom. But the night Sedge vanished . . . I scryed.

And I saw a cave, and there was a voice, and I know I wasn't supposed to --















You're
not in any
danger.



If I wanted to
hurt you, the witches'
boundary wouldn't
have let me in.



No, no, no.
I simply have...
a proposition.

snf

You're different
from the others.



You've not found
your first form yet,
have you?



It's the
influence
of the
witches.

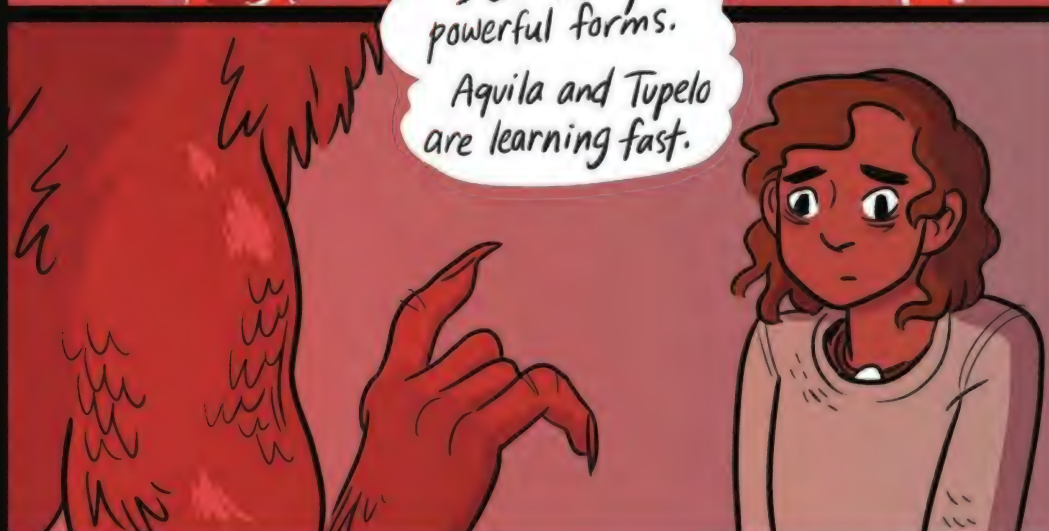
They are jealous
of power, and they
weaken shifters.



Come with me,
though, and I can
teach you to shift.

I can show you
powerful forms.

Aquila and Tupelo
are learning fast.























































How long's it going to glow, though?



Oh, uh . . . a while. Until "the magic has run its course."

Says to stay off the leg until then, too.

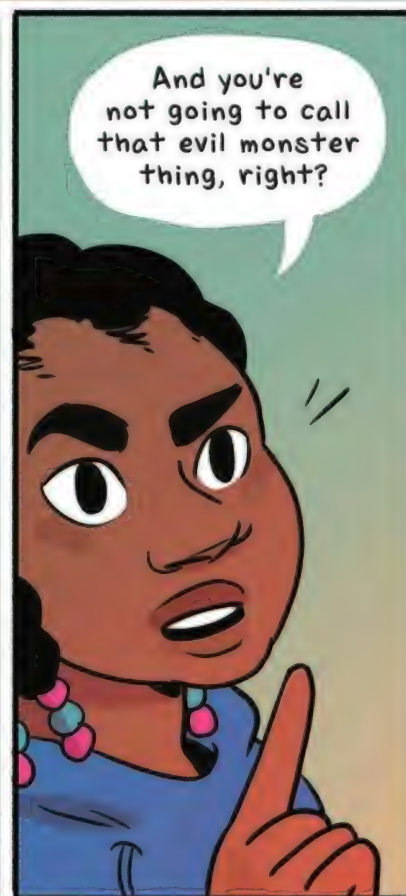


Aster!
What are my dads gonna think?

I don't know, but I have to go.
Can't stay out after sunset anymore.



Aw, they wanted you to stay for dinner. We're making meatloaf!





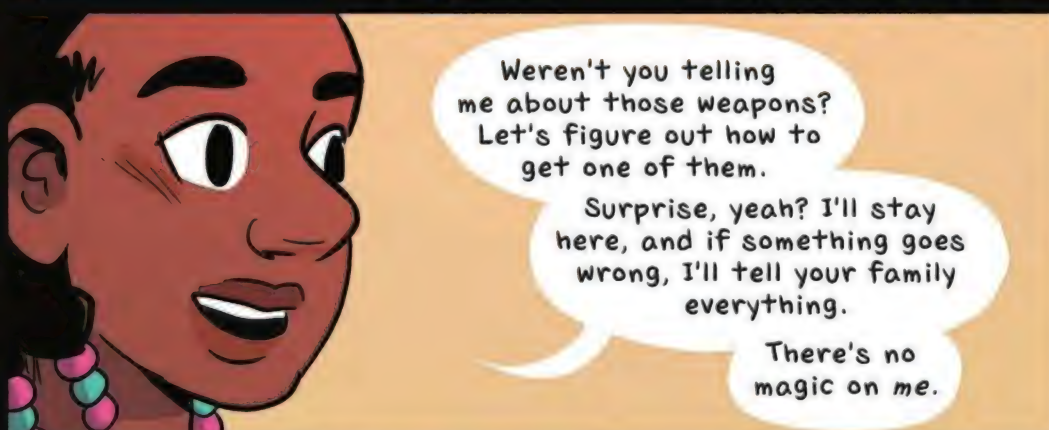












But it's so dangerous.

I have no idea what the Beast even is.

But you have real magic.

Shouldn't you use it for something . . . good?







Are you scared?



Uh, yeah.
A lot.

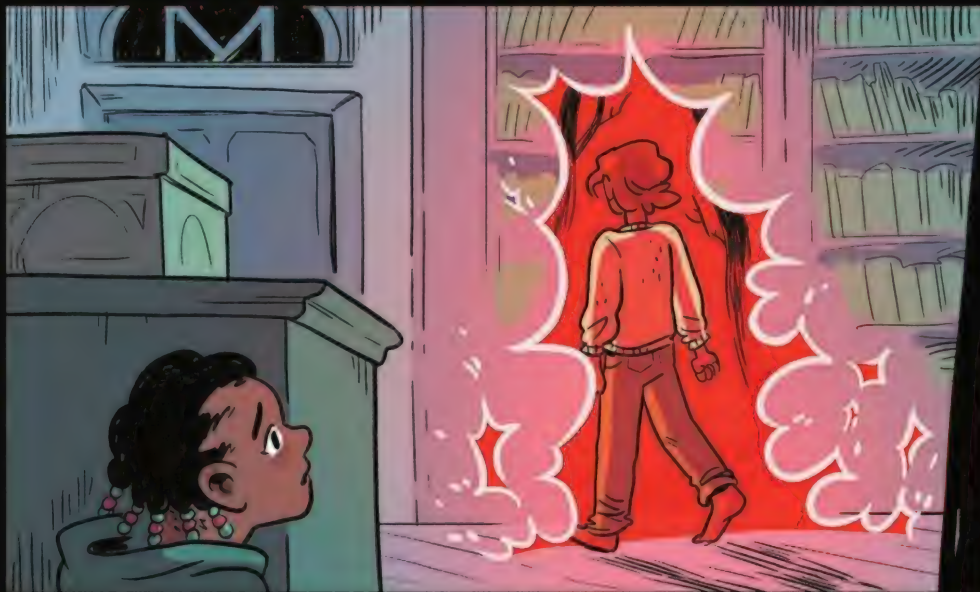
But . . . you're right. I think I'm the only one who can rescue Tupelo and Aquila.



You might want to hide. I don't know what'll happen.













Yeah, I did.
Are
my cousins
here?



Come inside.
What is your
name?



Ast --
uh.

What's
yours?



...come
inside.



I've brought
another to you,
boys.

Our pack
grows ever
larger.

Strength in numbers,
this time, for my assault
on the witches.







Aster,
is it?



There is something
strange about you,
an uneasiness.

I cannot see the
Beast inside you, and how
can I teach you to change
if I don't know what
manner of beast you are?

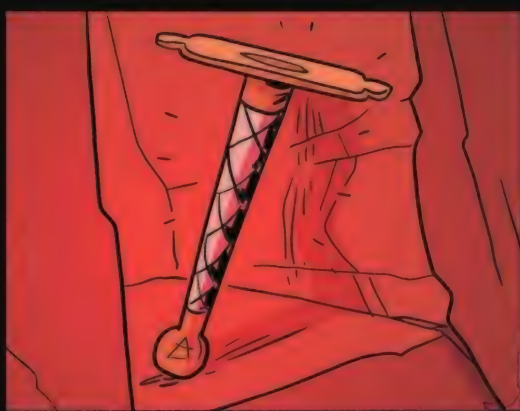
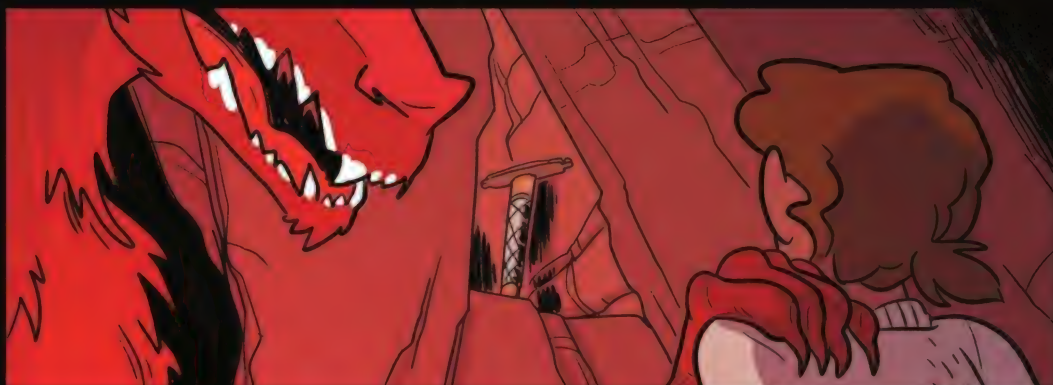


What are
you going to do
about it?

Where is the part of
you that wishes to fight,
that longs to kill?

Where is your hate
of the witches, of their
secrets and lies?

I will need
to taste your
soul.







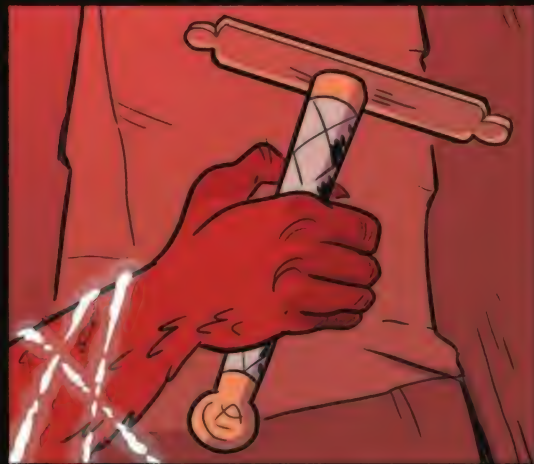
WITCH!















Yeah, but I think he's coming, and I don't know how to close this, and I have to get downstairs --





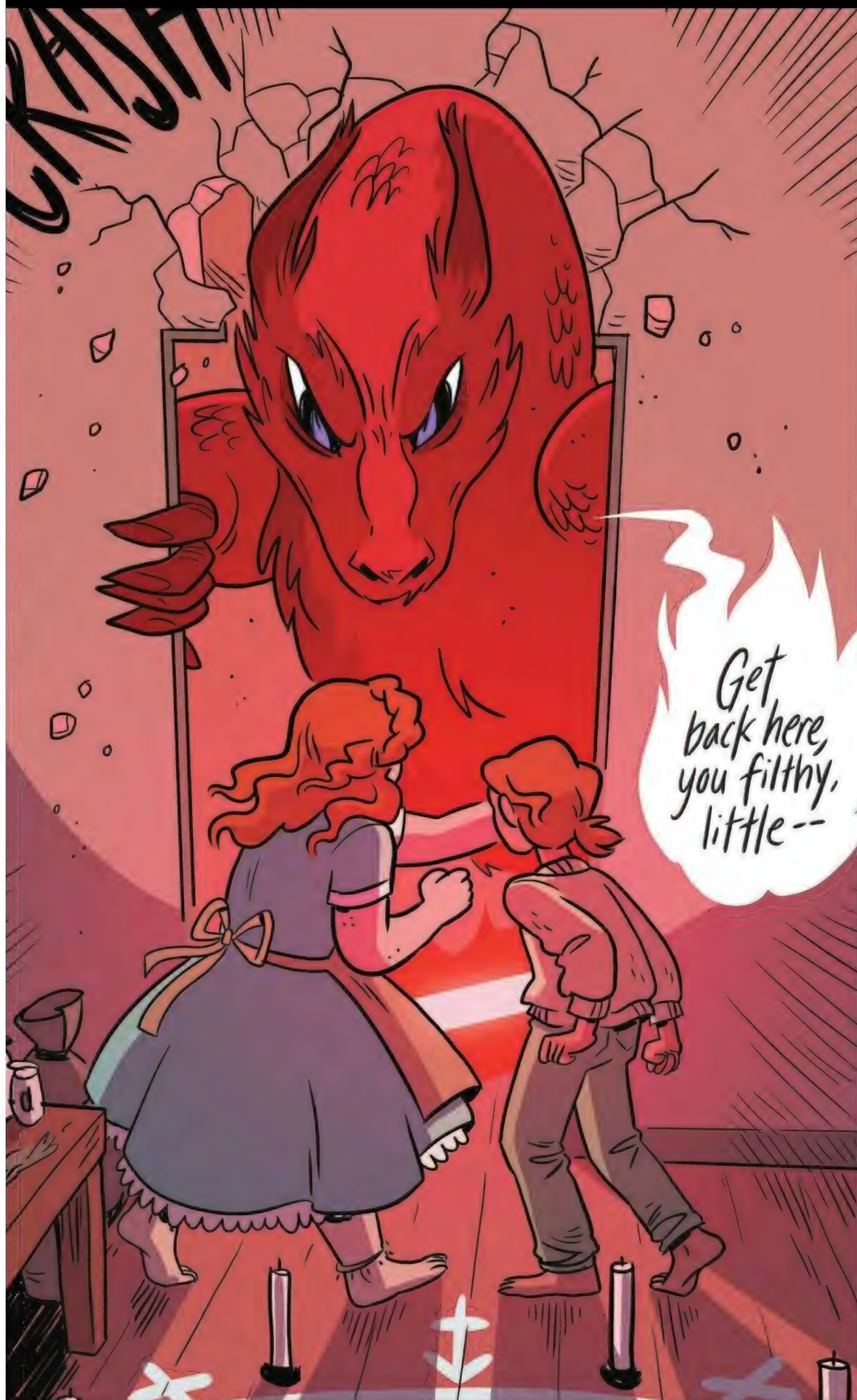












Get
back here,
you filthy,
little--



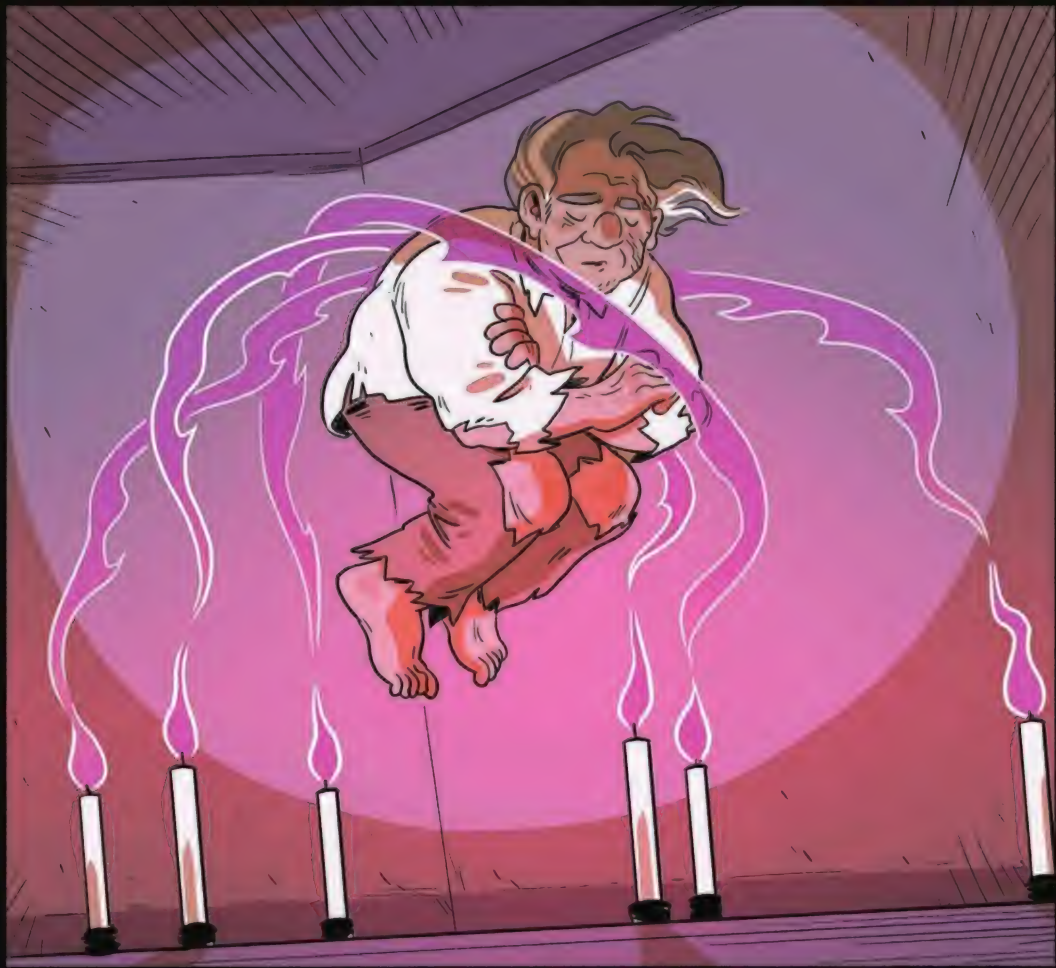





















A black hate grew in him: of me and our mothers and grandmothers, all those who had kept secrets from him.

Even of the other boys. They teased him so much.




He learned a strange kind of shifting that made him turn into monsters, not true animals at all, and hurt him as he shifted.





He left on our
eighteenth birthday.


Our family's rejection
spurred him to seek someone
who would teach him the kind
of magic he so desired.



I still had a bond to
him -- I could feel his anger and
resentment grow as he traveled
alone, frustrated in his quest.

I could feel him
building a powerful form and
becoming trapped in it.

I felt . . .



I felt him try
to come home once . . .
when he realized what
he had become.

We drove him away
as a beast and a demon.

I felt the pain
drive him mad.

My brother . . .

But surely
you did nothing
wrong.





Men can't use witchery. Everything forbids it.

Are you so sure?



Or is it because we don't teach men witchery or women shifting?

Mikasi was not the only one who had unexpected magic . . .

. . . but he could not hide it as well as I could.





I regret what we did to Mikasi every day. It was not his magic that was wrong, but what we denied him.

Don't do the same to Aster.



Aster, I . . . I don't understand.









... So I'll be starting
witchery classes in a few weeks,
but Juniper has been showing
me some things privately.

She says
there's all kinds
of gaps in what
I know!

I've never
heard someone be
so excited about
classes!













A what?

Never mind.
Pass the cookies?



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've drawn several graphic novels, but this is the first one I've written, and it's close to my heart.

I'd like to thank my mom, dad, and everyone else in our family for being so supportive of my unusual interests and implausible goals. I feel your love every day and I hope you feel mine, too.

I'd like to thank my friends — the people I know from summer camp, art school, comic conventions, animation, and the Internet. Your talent pushes me to work harder, and your kindness makes me a better person.

I'd like to thank my agent, Jen Linnan, who is fiercely smart, warm, and has been with me for every step on this journey.

I'd also like to thank my editor, Amanda Maciel, and my art director, Phil Falco, whose expertise and advice were a huge help in bringing this book into the world.

I drew this book during a year of many changes, and my partner was with me through them all. She believed in me even when I didn't. Thank you, Noelle — I love you and the home we've made together so very much.



DEVELOPMENT
ART



Aster, along with all the other kids in the family, mostly wears hand-me-downs, and accessorizes with protection charms made for him by his mother. His favorite color is purple and he doesn't like getting haircuts.

Even when Charlie has her leg in a cast, she still dresses like she's ready to play basketball or baseball at the drop of a hat. In an earlier draft of this story, she didn't have a broken leg, which is why there's a design of her without a cast.



This is early concept art of Aster, when I thought he'd be older. I always knew, though, that he liked to find out-of-the-way places to read through his spell book.



Holly is a perfect witch. She's powerful, practical, beautiful, and kind, and I wanted her character design to reflect that.

Like Holly, Tohor is a perfect example of a shapeshifter. He always knows what to do, he loves his family, and he's in touch with nature.



I had a lot of different designs for Mikasi, but I decided in the end to make him into a kind of dragon monster. He used magic to force himself to transform so many times that he became a mishmash of different animals—a coyote's face, a crocodile's body, and a human's hands.



Author photo © Leslie Ranne

MOLLY KNOX ØSTERTAG

grew up in the forests of upstate New York, where she spent the first half of her childhood reading about fantastical adventures and the second half acting them out with foam swords at a live-action role-playing group. She graduated in 2014 from the School of Visual Arts, where she studied cartooning and illustration; she now lives in Los Angeles, California. *The Witch Boy* is her middle-grade graphic novel debut. You can visit Molly online at www.mollyostertag.com.

"Thrilling and sweet. Ostertag is one of comics' brightest new voices."

— Hope Larson, author of *Compass South*



EVEN MAGIC HAS RULES...


Everyone in Aster's family is born with magic. Boys grow up to be shapeshifters; girls into witches. No exceptions.

But Aster can't seem to get the hang of shapeshifting. Instead, he spends his time spying on the witchery lessons the girls are getting. He seems to have a knack for casting spells and wants to know more, but the only person he can share his growing gift with is Charlie, a girl from the non-magical side of town.

Then, during a night of shapeshifting practice, one of the boys goes missing. Aster knows he can search for the boy with the witchcraft he's been secretly learning. Could breaking his family's most important tradition save the day—or ruin everything?



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